

## Moving from Learning Developers to Learning Development Practitioners

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### Learning development in the UK

Fifteen years ago the term ‘learning development’ was not well known within the UK higher education sector (Hilsdon, 2018). Although there remains no universal learning development definition, the term has grown in popularity and become synonymous with “look[ing] at the whole higher education learning experience from students' perspectives” (Hilsdon, 2009). Typically, such work focuses on the development of academic literacies / skills (such as writing, maths, study skills, information literacy, good academic practice and ICT) and/or transitions through university. Through adopting a learning development lens, a teacher will endeavour to provide blended, developmental and student-centred learning opportunities (either through the curriculum, co-curriculum or extra-curriculum) that are contextually relevant and timely (as opposed to remedial and bolted-on). As such, learning development relates to teaching practices per se which means that many teaching and learning professionals (such as Academic Skills Tutors, Subject Lecturers, Librarians, Learning Technologists Educational Developers and EAL/ESoL teachers) will share some affinity with learning development.

The origins of learning development in the UK can be traced to higher education widening participation policies during the 1990s and early 2000s. Such initiatives focussed on encouraging and enabling historically under-represented groups (such as BME, disabled or mature students) to enter university. As hoped, non-traditional student numbers grew exponentially during this period. Some students readily succeeded in a university context however it also became apparent that others had the potential to succeed but required support to make the transition. This led to universities expanding student support services. One such example was the introduction of small ‘study skills’ teams primarily tasked with providing support for students who were poorly prepared for study. As the ‘study skills’ field matured, there were calls for a shift in pedagogical focus, moving from what may have initially been seen as remedial teaching to a developmental partnership with students (the birth of learning development). The call to reposition was initially led by a small number of advocates and progressively gathered momentum through the:

- *Introduction of the Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN) JISCmail list*
- *Formation of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE)*
- *Introduction of an ALDinHE annual learning development conference*

- *Formation of the International Consortium of Academic Language and Learning Development (ICALLD)*

Today there are 87 institutional ALDinHE members (ALDinHE, 2018a), over 500 LDHEN subscribers and circa. 150 conference attendees each year. Reflecting the broad learning development ethos, community members represent a diverse cross section of higher education teaching and learning professionals.

### **The emergence of the ‘Learning Developer’**

Whilst a community consensus around learning development pedagogical focus has progressively converged, how academic skills specific provision has been operationalised within institutions remains variable as local arrangements have been driven by differing institutional needs and priorities (Pritchard, 2018). Common variations specifically associated with academic skills teams include:

Variation	Examples
Contract type	<i>Academic / Academic-related / Professional Services</i>
Delivery remit	<i>Curricular / Co-curricular / Extracurricular</i>
Remit	<i>Writing / Maths / Study skills / Computer Skills / ESoL / Peer Assisted Learning</i>
Team size	<i>Ranging from one person to a full team</i>
Team number	<i>Single team / multiple teams</i>
Team location	<i>Library / Student Support / Careers Service / Teaching and Learning Centre / Language Department / Faculty / School</i>

Similarly, academic skills related job titles are inconsistent across the sector and include an adjective(s)-noun pairing along the lines of:

Adjective	<i>Learning / Development / Academic / Skills / Professional / Liaison / Study / Teaching / Education</i>
Noun	<i>Tutor / Trainer / Lecturer / Fellow / Advisor / Librarian / Coach</i>

By nature, the learning development community is inclusive (as reflected in the ALDinHE values discussed in the following section) and will welcome like-minded teaching and learning professionals regardless of role or background. This in turn has given rise to the catch-all membership title ‘Learning Developer’ to describe individuals who self-select to join learning development communities (like LDHEN). Whilst the Learning Developer title is adequate in terms of acknowledging a broad affinity with learning development, it is inadequate in terms of describing the nature of this engagement as it lacks nuance around the extent to which learning development principles underpin practice. Within this context there has been a growing call amongst the learning development community to better define and professionalise titles related to learning development (Johnson, 2018; Webster, 2015; 2017).

### **Moving from ‘Learning Developers’ to graduated ‘Learning Development Practitioners’**

At the 2017 learning development conference, a community keynote was led by the ALDinHE Co-Chairs (Buckley and Briggs, 2017) to explore what it meant to be a Learning Developer. This session reaffirmed the inclusive perspective of the community as attendees argued against the notion that status could be defined in terms of specific qualifications and/or experience. There was however, a clear consensus that practitioners would share values reflecting the modern learning development paradigm. For example, in terms of embracing partnership working, developmental rather than remedial opportunities, student-centred methods and advocating best practices.

Based on community keynote feedback, ALDinHE (2018b) published five core values which would underpin the work of a Learning Development Practitioner:

1. *“Working alongside students to make sense of and get the most out of higher education learning*
2. *Making higher education inclusive through emancipatory practice, partnership working and collaboration*
3. *Adopting and sharing effective learning development practice with (and external to) our own institutions*
4. *Critical self-reflection, on-going learning and a commitment to professional development*
5. *Commitment to a scholarly approach and research related to learning development”.*

Learning development values are a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Accordingly learning development community members (Learning Developers) adopt values to different extents dependent upon stage of career and level of engagement with the wider learning development community. The nature of value adoption provides an insight into a practitioner’s pedagogical content knowledge and the extent to which learning development influences / underpins their practice. A differentiation between graduated ‘stages’ of learning development practice is therefore proposed below:

Stage of career	Level of Learning Development engagement	Practitioner Status			
		Emerging	Adherent	Certified	Leading
<i>Newcomer</i>	Discovering learning development values. Working out how values align with existing pedagogical beliefs.	X			
<i>Established</i>	Learning development values inform personal pedagogical beliefs		X	X	X
	Promotes learning development values and supports others to integrate these into their teaching practices			X	X
	Furthers learning development practices through				X

	community engagement and collaboration.				
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It is not suggested that all Learning Development Practitioners should aspire to become 'leading'; this will undoubtedly be dependent on personal circumstances (e.g. job role afforded opportunities / career aspirations) rather, that there is an acknowledgement that not all Learning Development Practitioners work in the same way (as 'Learning Developer' would imply) and differing levels of specialism within the learning development field exist. It was this school of thought that has driven recent professional development opportunities afforded by ALDinHE and the development of an ALDinHE Learning Development Practitioner recognition scheme.

### **The ALDinHE Certified Practitioner Recognition Scheme**

In autumn 2016, an ALDinHE working group was tasked with identifying how values might be evidenced by practitioners. Working group proposals formed the basis for the first iteration of a learning development recognition scheme which was piloted in spring 2017. This was initially based on conceptualising Learning Development Practitioner status as a dichotomy (certified or not certified) rather than graduated (as outlined above). Pilot applicants and reviewers were unanimous in reporting that a dichotomised scheme was too blunt an instrument and failed to reflect the granulated nature of learning development work. Accordingly, the scheme was reconceptualised as a two tier graduated model (corresponding to Certified and Leading statuses). This was piloted during autumn 2018 and found to work effectively from both applicant and reviewer perspectives.

At the 2018 learning development conference in Leicester (Easter), ALDinHE launched the first bespoke recognition scheme for Learning Development Practitioners (see ALDinHE, 2018c). Recognition is based on demonstration of the five ALDinHE values and mirrors the types of practitioner status proposed above. Specifically, the scheme recognises 'Certified' and 'Leading' statuses through Certified Practitioner (CeP) recognition and Certified Leading Practitioner (CeLP) recognition, respectively. The following is a summary of the application, review and decision processes (for a full account of scheme development and administration see Briggs, 2018):

#### *Application*

- CeP / CeLP applicants complete a standard application form.
- CeP application includes: career history (qualifications/ experiences), statements indicating engagement with each value, case study demonstrating values in practice and details of two application supporters.
- CeLP application includes: career history (qualifications/ experiences), reflective practitioner account demonstrating value engagement, two examples of learning development community engagement and two testimonials from application supporters.
- Applications are limited to a three month period each year.

#### *Review*

- Each application is independently reviewed by two trained reviewers who make an award recommendation (accept / minor revisions / resubmit). To date, reviewers have been found to be very consistent when making recommendations which indicates that training has supported consistent decision making.
- Reviewer recommendations are considered by an award panel that make CeP / CeLP status award decisions.

### *Decision*

- Applicant is advised of the panel decision and offered the chance to discuss reviewer feedback.
- Successful applicants are encouraged to add CeP / CeLP status to their email signature, receive a certificate and are added to an award recipient list on the ALDinHE website.
- When CeP and CeLP are awarded it is expected that recipients will join the scheme reviewer pool (this ensures the scheme has strong community ownership and remains sustainable).

To date, there have been 58 applications (37 x CeP and 21 x CeLP). Feedback from applicants has been overwhelmingly positive. This is particularly in terms of providing a bespoke space for structured reflection on learning development practice and providing an opportunity to discuss / receive feedback on personal professional development within a learning development capacity. This makes the scheme unique in focus and quite distinct from applying for a Higher Education Academy fellowship.

### **The future of Learning Development Practitioner professional development**

From a practitioner perspective, the framework presented in this paper outlines the first defined progressive career trajectory within learning development. This allows practitioners to objectively identify their current status and supports structured learning development related career planning. It also begins to address longstanding learning development community concerns about appropriate acknowledgement of learning development as a specialist field and how practitioner expertise should be recognised accordingly. This is of particular significance given that a number of Learning Development Practitioners work in teaching and learning roles (such as Academic Skills Tutors) that do not always map to the HEA fellowship scheme and/or provide limited opportunities to collect sufficiently diverse evidence to support HEA fellowship scheme application (especially at senior and principal levels).

In terms of ALDinHE, the framework provides a means to conceptualise and structure professional development opportunities for community members. The recognition scheme is a step change and in terms of providing more support for experienced members of the community. Following this, the association will endeavour to introduce more targeted professional development opportunities for practitioners at other graduated levels. For instance, Helen Webster (ALDinHE Treasurer / Professional Development Working Group Co-Chair) is currently leading the development of CPD days for newcomers to learning development which focus on fundamentals of learning development practice (such as delivering effective 1:1s and workshop delivery). It is planned that such resources will be

made openly available and through a train-the-trainer model delivered nationally on a regular basis.

Looking forward, more structured career progression, CPD opportunities and provision of professional recognition should serve to better establish the status of Learning Development Practitioners amongst teaching and learning professionals. It is intended that this, in turn, will encourage and support more teaching and learning professionals to embark on a career as Learning Development Practitioners. As this occurs, one would expect the traditional 'Learning Developer' title to become progressively less relevant and overtime potentially diminish.

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